

**Module 3c:  
Communication**  
Relevant reading



Zambian Red Cross Volunteer distributing bednets to help prevent malaria (Photo: Netherlands Red Cross)

Relevant reading

## A how-to guide on communicating climate change

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This module is aimed at Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies and IFRC secretariat staff to help them communicate concepts around climate change to different stakeholders and partners, including staff and volunteers, governments, partner organizations, youth and communities. Communication on climate change can create awareness and promote actions to reduce the vulnerability to changing climate risks now and in the future.

It is *not* designed to explain what climate change is – that can be found in Module 1a of this training package and is worth studying first – but focuses instead on how to pass this information on to those who need it and can use it. After all, knowledge is worthless if it does not reach those who need it.

Climate change is a complex, scientific, uncertain and at times confusing topic to understand and integrate into Red Cross Red Crescent work. One of the greatest challenges in tackling climate change is to make the science behind it understandable and relevant for individual countries, governments, regions and communities, so that actions may be taken by these groups to reduce climate impacts.

This guide is focused on the creation of effective, simple and consistent messages that promote understanding within National Societies on climate change. At the same time, this module aims to give you the ability to communicate messages to other audiences through tools that generate knowledge. We provide examples of other experience and guidelines and describe a broader framework of alliances to improve collaboration among all stakeholders and communities to optimize the impact of communications.

Building on the International Federation's own guide – which we highly recommend as key reading: *Public awareness and public education for disaster risk reduction: a guide* – this guide asks, *what* it is you want to communicate? *To whom* do you want to direct your messages? And, *with whom* is it you want to engage? Finally, the guide examines how best to communicate this information and offers suggestions and strategies for doing so.

For the Climate Centre's perspective on effective communication in relation to predictions, forecasts, threats and alerts, see Modules 2a: *Early Warning Early Action and Forecast-based Financing*, and Module 2c: *Community resilience and Climate*. National Societies can always reach out the [IFRC/IRI Helpdesk](#) with questions around scientific linkages of extreme events and climate change or interpretations of climate change projections.

## 2. CLIMATE CHANGE: RED CROSS RED CRESCENT POSITIONS AND ROLES

As members of an international movement and as part of Strategy 2020, we have a responsibility to

- Reduce climate risks
- Strengthen capacity-building in disaster preparedness and risk reduction
- Strengthen and improve response
- Help providers of forecast and climate information supply simple messages for use in decision-making
- Advocate for the most vulnerable people and communicate the humanitarian consequences of climate change
- Have a strong and active presence in global climate change negotiations
- Help vulnerable people become more resilient in the face of changing climate-risks.

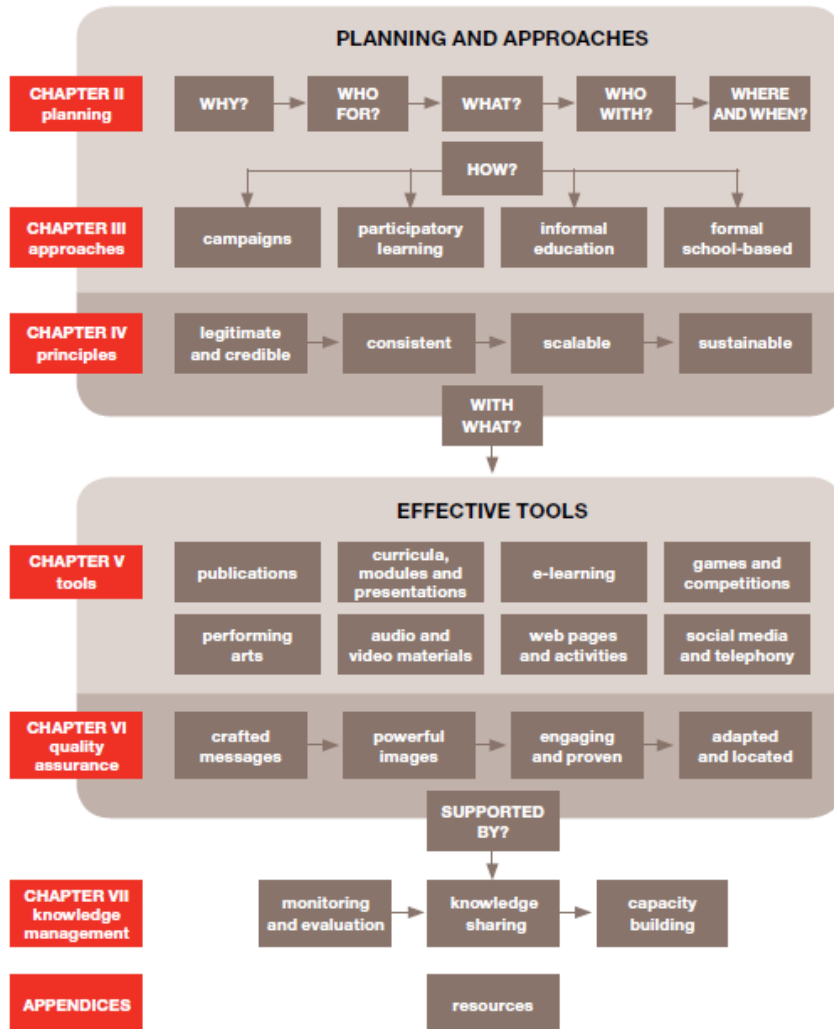
There are three important messages for the Red Cross Red Crescent to convey:

- the risk of climate-related disasters is increasing;
- the poor, the elderly and the sick are disproportionately vulnerable;
- and we can prepare.

***These positions and commitments should be at the core of awareness-raising efforts in relation to climate change and its humanitarian consequences.***

### 3. WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE

What is the objective of your communications and what do you hope to achieve with them? The chart below represents one way of looking at this issue graphically.



(Source: IFRC. *Public awareness and public education for disaster risk reduction: a guide*, 2011)

The greatest challenge of communicating climate change is how to make science, often involving large-scale uncertain predictions, understandable so that it can be acted on at the local level.

#### Box 1. Important resources on climate change

- **Module 1a, *Science and impacts?***
- **Meteorological offices and national climate change focal points**
- **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fifth Assessment Report, 2014**
- **IPCC special report on extremes, 2011**
- **IPCC special report on Global Warming of 1.5 degrees**
- **Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Guide.**

### 3.2 What information do you want to communicate?

There are several aspects of climate change that you may want to communicate, and these typically would build upon each other, furthering understanding of climate change and actions that can be taken to adapt to it. The exact purpose of your communications must be clear in each product.

Firstly, there is raising the awareness about why climate change is happening and what its projected impacts are. The changes are already occurring and will continue. This can be linked with discussions on how a particular community might be vulnerable to changing climate risks, exacerbating current conditions such as wetter summers or longer dry seasons, and what we can do to face these risks. What is critical here is not to discuss climate change on its own but to integrate it into other Red Cross Red Crescent work and ongoing efforts to address current vulnerabilities and examine how climate change may influence current activities.

It is also important to build upon the context and knowledge of your target audience and where possible to complement local knowledge with the increasingly available scientific information that can be used to predict climate and weather.

Information covering shorter timescales – hours, days, weeks and months ahead – can be just as effective at addressing worsening climate than longer-term information covering decades. If you have been able to access short-term (about five days) or longer term (seasonal) information and you are comfortable using this, you can take it to your audience and explore how it could be used in early-warning systems, or assessing which crops to grow and when to plant them, or identifying trends such as drought. (Refer to the module on early warning early action for more information about this approach.)

### 3.3 With whom can you work together to most effectively communicate?

Who can you work with best to strengthen your approach and messages?

If you want to become a credible resource for the public on climate change, you can consider working closely together with your meteorological office and/or your government's climate change focal point, asking them to thoroughly check your messages before you publish them.

It remains important to be careful about either overly alarming statements, where every extreme event gets automatically attributed to climate change. This can cause skepticism, and scientists will have the argument that we are not correctly attributing weather events to climate change. Please feel free to reach out the [IFRC/IRI helpdesk](#) or for any statements on climate change and extreme events.

You can also check with the Climate Centre team to see if they can assist. For educational purposes it might be necessary to check with your education ministry to make sure they approve of content aimed at children. Other ministries and stakeholders may also be important.

### 3.4 To whom do you want to communicate?

Understand your audience and what their interests and knowledge are. Tailor your messages to them.

There are many potential audiences for sharing information and raising awareness, including governments and national and regional organizations, other Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers, and communities. Many of these groups will have heard of climate change, some may be noticing what they might call “funny weather” but will not know what it is or how it is affecting them and what to do about it. Others will already be experts within their own fields, but may need to consider changing risks.

## Box 2. Tailoring messages

Talk to disaster managers about how climate change may expose different areas to more frequent, stronger weather-related hazards; with water and sanitation workers discuss changes to water regimes and the availability and design of infrastructure; with governments there may need to be a greater focus on humanitarian diplomacy and allocation of funding for climate adaptation to vulnerable people; working together with communities to identify techniques for reducing vulnerability to climate change, there will be less need to discuss science; and with youth groups it may be raising awareness and educating about climate change to determine their future roles.

One common problem is that people often do not understand *how* climate change will affect them, and as a result they have no motivation to learn about it and take actions to adapt to it. Making your communications relevant to the audience you are targeting is critical and relating current and potential changes to everyday life and livelihoods is essential. For example, is there any point in discussing the concept and risks of melting glaciers with someone in the desert? (Refer to the module on community risk for further thoughts on this issue.)

You and your target audience should both be involved in developing strategies to communicate messages related to changing climate risks. Is there someone receptive in your target audience you could ask for ideas or feedback? You can even set up brainstorm sessions with the different target groups, including volunteers.

### 3.4 What are your communications objectives?

What do you want people to do differently?

This will depend on factors such as the existing climate risks, current understanding of climate change and use of climate information and the resources available.

It is important to remember that climate change is not a hazard or a risk in itself, but a process by which existing weather-related risks are increasing in frequency, magnitude and intensity, and often their nature is changing. Consequently, climate change should not be considered on its own but integrated into Red Cross Red Crescent work, alongside existing climate-related vulnerabilities.

## Box 3. Examples of behaviour change

Successful climate change adaptation is not necessarily about building flood walls or big engineering projects; it is a shift in *behaviours*. Strategies such as livelihood diversification, like rearing ducks which will survive floods rather than chickens, or planting more drought-resistant crops, or using better irrigation techniques. This is perhaps the most important outcome of these communications exercises, and many of these changes are easy to carry out and can reduce vulnerability.

Many behavioural and attitudinal changes which could be implemented have been tried elsewhere; people in the community will have their own ideas and suggestions about what is appropriate locally, so be open to these ideas. It is also a good idea to consult technical experts in developing “no-regrets” options for adapting to a changing weather pattern. These are options for building resilience even in the absence of climate change, such as developing early warning systems.

The main objectives of communications processes may include:

- Raising awareness of climate change as an issue for vulnerable people.
- Encouraging changes in behaviour and attitudes, and altering the way people think about the weather and longer-term changes.
- Developing effective early warning systems using short-term weather forecasts and strategies such as gathering in safe places or protecting food supplies during floods.
- Introducing the use of seasonal forecasts information on, for example, rainfall or drought.

**Box 4. Science**

**Scientific information** can be effectively integrated into existing programmes. For example, early warnings of extreme events could enhance disaster risk reduction. Or information on a shifting climate may enhance action on specific health-risks. The key here would be to integrate this knowledge into decision-making, and this requires a strong relationship with forecasters and regular, easy access to this information.

**3.5 How can you best communicate your objectives?**

The first thing you'll want to understand is how climate change is likely to affect your country or region. This information may come from this training manual, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, the IFRC helpdesk at IRI ([ifrc@iri.columbia.edu](mailto:ifrc@iri.columbia.edu)) or perhaps your local climate change focal point or meteorological agency. This can be one of the biggest hurdles to overcome; often this information is hard to access and may seem overly complex and confusing with too many maps, graphs and charts that make little sense.

This is a common problem and if you are confronted with it, the best thing to do is to try to talk to a relevant authority and ask them to explain it to you more simply. Ask them to explain the uncertainties and limitations of the projections. There is no crystal ball for climate information therefore none of it is perfect. We need to understand the limits of this information because these can be just as important as the information itself. The team at the Climate Centre and at the IFRC helpdesk at IRI is also available to help interpret this information, so feel free to use their experience.

**Box 5. Simplify**

It is worth remembering that most existing information on climate and weather has not been produced specifically for humanitarian purposes. It is often complex information provided by scientists who write for multiple audiences, which can lead to high levels of complexity of the information provided. *Don't be afraid to ask for the information to be simplified* – the providers may not be used to formulating this kind of information in simple ways. Open a dialogue with your climate or weather information-provider and explain which level of detail you need to be able to make relevant decisions within your work and how clear climate signals (e.g. the likelihood of extreme rainfall) can be sent to you in time. For example, knowing in advance when a drought may occur, leading to potential crop failure, or whether rainfall is likely to be getting heavier over time, can be a great asset to humanitarian work, if communications are comprehensible and well understood.

It is important that you know what is going to happen in your area and that you show people how these changes are of concern to you as a humanitarian. Changes on the other side of the world such as the melting of ice caps, for example, are results of climate change, but they are unlikely to relate directly to your audience, so will not motivate action.

In the *Examples* section of this module you'll find a checklist about *how* to work on climate change, based on the experience of the Colombian Red Cross and their interaction with other National Societies, communities and stakeholders.

**4. COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY**

There is no right or wrong way to communicate, provided it adheres to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (“the Movement”) and its code of conduct and is mindful of the target audience and vulnerable populations.

It is recommended that you seek inspiration from all the examples of material and resources produced by National Societies and the IFRC secretariat (see the *Examples* section in this module). Methods used include books, posters, participatory workshops, drama productions, video, television, events, songs and message boards. Below are a series of guidelines to help develop your message.

	To WHOM	WHAT	HOW	Possible Methods
1.	National government / donors (for more info see Module 3a on advocacy )	Official advocacy documents and policy briefs on the need for assisting vulnerable populations to adapt to a changing climate	The science and predictions associated with climate change gained through met offices, universities in your country, and the Movement's positions and experience in using forecast information and other adaptation efforts	Stakeholder meeting, background publication, policy briefs
2.	Disaster managers and health officers	Impact of climate variability and change on Red Cross Red Crescent work and programmes	The trends associated with climate change gained through met offices, universities, etc. in your country	Climate assessment, brochures, events, games, exercises
3.	Red Cross volunteers	Impact of climate variability and change on Red Cross Red Crescent work and programmes	Extracting simple messages from the more complicated knowledge derived from met offices, universities, etc. in your country	Participatory workshops, games, videos, posters
4.	Communities and the wider public	Awareness raising, introducing the concept and challenges of climate change and what can be done to address the impacts	Extracting simple messages from the more complicated knowledge derived from met offices, universities, etc. in your country. Combining it with risk reduction messages	Brochures, videos, radio commercials, plays, posters, internet-based tools (games, Google Earth etc.) In some cases, village committees or community organizations established for risk reduction and first aid may help promote messages
5.	Youth groups	Awareness raising, introducing the idea of climate change	Extracting simple messages from the more complicated knowledge deriving from met offices, universities, etc. in your country	Participatory workshops, games, comic books, puppet shows, quizzes

#### 4.1 Real and relevant

Taking into account the type of communities we reach and the variety of problems they have, we have to acknowledge that climate change is not always the most pressing issue, so we need to make sure information we are bringing to our target audience is relevant.

For example, rather than talking with vulnerable communities about projections for rises in sea level 50 years from now, it might be good to save that conversation for government planners and only bring this topic to communities if they experience actual impacts from sea-level rises – like bigger storm surges, more coastal flooding, salt-water contamination of groundwater and soils, especially if they are combined with other factors such as sand mining, building close to the sea, etc.

When a new concept is introduced, people will understand this from the perspective of existing knowledge and previous experience. By framing climate change around existing variability and hazards, people will have something concrete to relate to and, more importantly, realize why it is important to take action in an increasingly hostile climate. However, if you start showing complicated graphs and confusing maps and talk about predictions for 50 years into the future, it will be harder for people to see the immediate relevance.

**Box 6. Ask the community**

People are already noticing changes in weather patterns and experience – or hear about – changes in disaster patterns such as hurricanes, flooding or droughts. Ask people what changes they have noticed in their own lives that could be linked to climate variability and change. This is the best way to start a discussion about what climate change is (and isn't). You can cross-check their observations with the meteorological office.

**4.2 Simple and understandable**

Climate change may appear a complicated topic, and although there are predictions for the future there is also a great deal of uncertainty on the speed of some effects, and especially *how* the larger trend and patterns that can be predicted will manifest themselves at the local level. No models can predict precise impacts at the district and town level. Communicating such uncertainties is challenging, but remember to be honest when communicating the limitations and uncertainties of climate science and projections. Read the section on pitfalls (page 65) in the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Guide, also included below.

**Box 7. Pitfalls**

A synthesis of three common categories of climate-related messages – be aware of their pitfalls:

- **Reduction of greenhouse gas pollution perspective:** When investigating climate change information in your country, you may find that most of the messages are about reducing greenhouse gases (“mitigation”, as opposed to “adaptation”) such as *turn off the lights* or *install solar power*. Although prevention of further climate change is highly important, the key humanitarian concern is to address the *impacts* of climate change on vulnerable people. Stay close to your expertise: reducing vulnerability and impacts of disasters.
- **Sensationalist perspective:** Exaggerated doomsday messages (*due to climate change, much of the globe will become uninhabitable within 50 years*) will damage your credibility and may lead to a sense of despair.
- **Optimistic perspective:** Focus on the potential for acting in time and no-regrets adaptation that will be good for local development, despite all uncertainty about the specific local impacts of climate change. It might be harder to get media attention, but in the end it promotes positive action to reduce vulnerability. “No-regrets” refers to measures that could promote resilience even in the absence of climate change.

Also, be aware of the level of literacy of your audience; you need a method which everyone will understand, so for certain types of audience, plays and posters will be more appropriate than technical PowerPoint presentations. You might build upon the experience of communicating about other complicated topics like HIV/AIDS and influenza.

**Box 8. We know enough despite many uncertainties**

In some regions a particular change in the climate is more certain than in others. In other words, in some regions computer models that simulate the Earth's climate agree with each other; in some areas they disagree. For example, there is agreement among the models that there is likely to be a decrease in rainfall during June- August; as a result people will experience a significant loss of run-off water in rivers.<sup>1</sup>

And with the projected increase in temperature, there is likely to be an increase of millions of people who experience water stress.<sup>2</sup> In regions such as the Middle East, however, there can be great variance in computer



models and uncertainty around whether it will get wetter or drier in some places. This doesn't mean we can't act. We can become better at managing current climate risk and increase people's overall resilience so that they are better able to cope with changes, whichever direction they go in.

### 4.3 Innovative and interactive

The most effective way of communicating a message so that your audience remembers the key messages is to make it an interactive learning process.

For example, if you are organizing workshops, consider only introducing the concepts of climate change, and summarize likely impacts on the country, sector or community levels, and then invite your audience to talk about their own experiences. Set up participatory workshops with people organized in small groups to discuss what changes they are noticing in the climate already, how they are being affected, what strategies they are using now to cope with these changes, and what other strategies could be useful. Include men, women and children – together or separately depending on local circumstances – as they will all have different opinions and ideas.

Among the best interactive learning tools are games and quizzes, participatory video, storytelling, and interactive exercises that build on existing tools for assessment like the seasonal calendar, coping mechanisms, historical profiling, visualization and projection, vision, and mapping hazards. See the many suggested exercises and games included in this training package.

If you want to make a film, or poster or drama production, have an initial participatory meeting or discussion with the group you are engaging with and train the basic techniques, and then let the users take over the design.

Nowadays, huge amounts of information about climate change is available on the Internet and elsewhere, but the challenge is to use only what is factual and credible and relevant to our work. Use the latest science available (find links on the Climate Centre website) and do not get caught up in an unnecessary debate about facts and figures.

## 5. NEWS AND MEDIA RELATIONS

Many National Societies are already skilled in capturing national media attention, although possibly not yet on the issue of climate change. Remember that you can profile the National Society as an actor in climate change adaptation, demonstrate that you are a reliable source of information on the humanitarian aspects of climate change and position your National Society as an attractive partner.

You can enhance media relations by:

- Inviting journalists to participate in inter-agency working groups
- Inviting them to community activities of the National Society
- Holding press conferences (with other experts if you like) to utilize media interest in recent disasters or other timely events such as climate change conferences, the release of the Federation's World Disasters Report or IPCC reports, etc.
- Sharing information frequently and generating the need for interviews with the spokespeople of the National Society for more information.
- Inviting recognized people (opinion leaders) to your National Society's forums and workshops.

## 6. MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Our programmes and projects have been promoted through different products and marketing strategies. However, it is important to keep branding and style as uniquely Red Cross Red Crescent. Do not forget to:

- Respect rules for use of emblem and logos; verify that our logo is located on neutral spaces, according with principles and rules.
- Get appropriate sign-off for your communications messages.
- Be consistent with the message and actions you are promoting.
- Distribute communications materials strategically at key events to key people.

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